

Snapshots 2003

July 25

California

Reducing the Risk, Reaping the Benefits

When residents in and around Sawmill-Hungry Gulch participated in “Fire Safe Community Chipper Days” this spring, they had no idea how important that event would become in their life. Within a couple months of clearing debris off roofs and thinning vegetation around their homes east of Bakersfield, California, a wildfire pushed through their community threatening more than 100 homes and burning four residences and five outbuildings.

The outcome could have easily been much worse. When the Sawmill Fire was at its most threatening, 120 homes were at risk of being burned, and more than 500 residents were evacuated. Yet only nine structures succumbed to a fire that moved directly through the community. One year ago, the story was very different, when more than 60 homes burned in the Deer and Borel fires in the Kern River Valley.

The hazardous fuel reduction projects completed since last fall in and around the Sawmill-Hungry Gulch community, including fuel treatments along the narrow access road into Lake Isabella, turned what could have been a disaster into a success story. More than 100 homes survived the Sawmill Fire, which started in a residence, moved through the adjacent wildland, and then into the community.

Homeowners, in cooperation with the Kern Valley Fire Safe Council of which BLM Bakersfield is a member, volunteers and federal agencies, cleared roofs and thinned vegetation around homes. Through a BLM Grant, the Fire Safe Council purchased the chipper, which is being used in Kern Valley communities organizing projects. Cuttings and trimmings were piled and chipped or burned by BLM. BLM fire crews thinned vegetation 20



These four photos show examples of dense ponderosa pine regeneration, post-treatment area, and burning near the Sawmill-Hungry Gulch area.



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feet on either side of the main road to community, thus improving access during emergencies. BLM also co-hosted a National Firewise Workshop in the area and is currently hosting a Student Conservation Association Fire Education Team to supplement their wildfire outreach and education efforts.

These efforts, along with those of the community and other stakeholders, have everyone feeling proud of the progress they've made to make the community more fire safe. Fire will always be part of the Kern River Valley but by working cooperatively with local residents, the losses resulting from this fire were greatly reduced.

Contact: Debbie Santiago, (661) 391-6097

Partnering With Pinyon Pines Community

Pinyon Pines, California is located in the high desert area of Riverside County, California. It is one of 1,100 communities at risk of wildland fire in California. Surrounded by the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument, the area is jointly managed by the BLM and the US Forest Service. Drought has affected the pinyon junipers and pines in the region and the proximity to the extreme tree mortality being experienced in nearby mountain communities is proving to be a powerful call to action to deal with the Pinyon Pine's heavy fuel loading.



Piles of thinned vegetation is chipped.

Recently, fire staff from BLM's Palm Springs – South Coast Office partnered with Pinyon Pine community volunteers, local Fire Safe Council members from nearby Idyllwild, the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection and the Riverside County Fire Department to reduce the drought-stricken heavy fuels around the community. The thinning and chipping project was scheduled for a weekend to maximize both community interest and involvement and over eight acres of thick brush was treated. Local press coverage was good and word-of-mouth about the project is expected to generate even greater participation and results during future community chipping days.

The BLM continues to offer assistance to communities-at-risk of wildland fire in an effort to



BLM and California Department of Forestry crews work the chipper.



Brush thinned by community members awaits chipping.



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reduce their risk of catastrophic wildfire. BLM's commitment to the Pinyon Pine area, including the stationing of a wildland fire engine in the immediate area during the past two fire seasons is acknowledged and appreciated by the community. By working together, these wildland urban interface communities are becoming safer places to live.

Contact: Ron Woychak, (858) 674-2968

Taking It to the Streets

Fire Prevention Officer Clay Howe, of BLM's Palm Springs- South Coast Office, remembers from his childhood pickup trucks from the Cleveland National Forest with large fire prevention signs mounted on the tailgates. The television show "Lassie" was on TV at that time and the Forest Ranger who cared for the star drove the same trucks. This publicity provided for some great public relations for the Forest Service as well as a positive message to the public to help prevent forest fires. Little did Clay know then that he would one day get to experiment with this type of public outreach!

BLM's Palm Springs-South Coast Office jurisdiction includes San Diego and western Imperial counties in southern California. This area experiences a fire season that essentially lasts all year and has many communities at risk of wildland fire. In an effort to compliment the traditional fire prevention and education activities occurring in the Palm Spring's South Coast Office, Clay decided to supplement his patrol vehicle with fire prevention messages similar to what he recalled from his childhood.

In an effort to make the messages attractive and appealing, an image of Smokey Bear was selected by employees and now adorns both sides of the patrol vehicle. Two messages accompany the image; "Be Careful With Fire" and "Prevent Wildfires". As semi-



Fire prevention messages at the international border.

annual analysis is made of the area's fire problem, these messages can be changed. For example, due to the large numbers of structures lost in recent fires, the fire staff is now considering several new defensible space and Firewise messages

The patrol unit has been very popular with the public presenting a memorable fire prevention message while also providing for good public relations for the BLM. The vehicle has traveled over 60,000 miles in the past two years, averaging 150 miles per day while patrolling an area with a population exceeding four million people.

The vehicle has also been displayed at Camp Smokey at the California State Fair at Sacramento, the Wild Horse and Burro Adoption at Roseville, Southern California Association of Forester and Fire Wardens, Firewise Workshop at Asilomar and Operation Imperial Dunes with the El Centro Field Office.

While it's impossible to quantify how many fire prevention impressions this project has generated, one thing is clear...this patrol vehicle is getting noticed and seldom fails to elicit a smile or wave from the kid inside of all of us. And who knows, maybe a future fire prevention officer will remember the message well into the future!

Contact: Clay Howe, (858) 676-0894



Big Sur receives the fire prevention message.



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